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AUTHOR Scott, John Anthony
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ABSTRACT

History instruction at the secondary level is not sufficiently relevant to the needs of students today. The traditional concept and function of most textbook oriented teaching is one of indoctrination, Americanization, and an attempt at preserving the economic, social, and political status quo. There is a need to educate students to intelligently confront and solve social problems. Although social scientists have developed new innovative courses, schools, and projects, they have not developed a strategy for bringing about needed changes in history. The history profession has contributions to make in the formation of an alternative strategy. Suggested points of strategy which need to be debated are: 1) The role of the school is to prepare students for activism toward attacking social problems and to help them view social change as a catalyst of world survival. 2) In this context, historians can attack and demolish racist myths and teach the origin and nature of war as a human institution over which social control is possible. 3) Historians can also develop the significance of regional and local themes with special reference to the educational needs of different ethnic groups. A related document is ED 048 070. (SJM)

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Effective History Teaching in the High Schools: a call for a new strategy

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John Anthony Scott
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The teaching of history in our high schools is caught in a crisis of functional obsolescence that renders it inadequate to the new and urgent needs of youth today. The traditional concept and function of history teaching developed in the latter half of the 19th century; it was of particular significance in an era when huge numbers of immigrant children were sucked into the schools. Teaching history to these people, at elementary or secondary levels indifferently, was regarded as a function of government. Its purpose was to inculcate loyalty, to turn out docile and acquiescent producers for a newly-industrialized society. Children according to the old view, were empty vessels that needed to be filled with the proper facts, the proper attitudes, and the proper ideas. All of this, hopefully, would result in the proper behavior. Children must keep quiet when told, write when told, and speak when called upon.

History indoctrination of the old type was not only doctrinaire but also imbued with the idea of Anglo-Saxon superiority. Americanization was an operation in which the social studies teacher played a critical role. Americanization was designed to cleanse the children of their un-American ethnicity, to decontaminate them, to fill them with the new wine of a quasi-official American lifestyle.

The dividends paid by this approach to historical education were measured in terms of political conformity and acquiescence in the established social order. Over the years the teacher with his big desk and the Flag at his right hand personified for millions of youth the reality of governmental authority. If this state of affairs warped the minds of the pupils it also worked havoc with teachers and the possibility of their intellectual growth. This was true then, and because the old system continues to dominate the schools, it is on the whole true now. Teachers, as one authority has written,

> must adapt their style not only to the children but to the institution, to the principal's requirements, to the other teachers' attitudes....The teachers' custodial function often outweighs their educative function....Conformism to the institution, rather than creative teaching, is the key to success. [1]

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1. Eleanor Burke Leacock, Teaching and Learning in City Schools (New York, 1969), 202.

The tool of history teaching was, and on the whole still is, the text. The emphasis from the beginning was upon political and military events, with a heavy stress upon iconography. Wise leaders fought wise wars and, in between, strengthened Democracy. All of these leaders, of course, were white, and not a few of them owned slaves. There have, of course, been some dramatic changes in textbook design during the sixties. The texts have been jazzed up: they are attractively laid out, often with ink of three or four different colors, and with a profusion of maps and pictures. Black people and other ethnic groups have begun to make their appearance in these pages and begin at least to be treated with elementary courtesy. But we may argue with reason that the change is more in form than in content. The old emphasis, the old purpose of indoctrination still casts a heavy shadow, still places its stamp upon the majority of these high school texts that are so heavily in use from coast to coast.

None of this will do any more. The assumptions, the practices and the concepts of the traditional doctrinaire approach to history teaching still mold the classroom thinking and the classroom behavior of thousands of our high school history teachers. These assumptions and concepts are not only simplistic but insanely dangerous in the conditions of the world which we now confront. It is imperative today to eradicate this colossal heritage of conformist teaching, which every hour and every day of the school year still molds the transactions of the classroom and the thinking of the millions of youth who pass through it. Our era is beset with frightful problems and frightful risks. We are faced, as a nation, with a crisis of survival, we live on a powder keg of nuclear and biological weapons in a society beset with deep problems of race, poverty, unemployment and environmental destruction. We need to be turning out men and women who can face, grasp, and cope with these problems, who can take power into their hands and solve them. We need people willing to innovate, to think independently, to feel deeply about human needs, and to commit themselves to work for social change. We need to encourage the growth of a youth brimming with personal initiative. We have no more need of passive pawns stamped out in a chilling atmosphere of conformity and rote.

There is, in sum, a deep contradiction between these new social needs and the old, passive authoritarian pedagogy of indoctrination. There is a rising mood of revolt among the students themselves that underlines <u>their</u> impatience. They direct their sharpest criticism at social studies courses that fail to deal honestly and realistically with the problems of modern society. Throughout the USA the students are voting with their feet: they are staying away from classes and they are dropping out. They are bored with the entire educational process. They are angry, resentful, disaffected.

Social scientists are aware of this crisis. Changes to cope with it have been instituted, but at a miserably slow pace. <u>Eppur si muove</u>; they have been taking place. In the first place, other social science disciplines have been invading the high school history field. This, evidently, is something which these people feel is too important to be left to the historians by themselves. For this we

may be thankful. The anthropologists, economists, sociologists, and so on, are throwing open windows and letting a little fresh air into stale classrooms. They are prodding sleeping historians to awake from their dogmatic slumbers.

In 1965, for example, a group of college anthropologists initiated a ninth-grade course in anthropology at Winnetka Country Day [Winnetka, Illinois], and continued the experiment for three years. It must have been a refreshing experience. Unlike some of our colleagues the anthropologists rolled up their sleeves, came down into the high school, and taught the course themselves. They weren't afraid to try and to fail -- they had had no previous high school teaching experience. They didn't insult the intelligence of the students with Madison Avenue textbook mush, but gave them first-rate adult studies to read: Kroeber's Ishi, Marriot's Ten Grandmothers, Turnbull's Forest People, Marshall's Harmless People. All these books focus superbly on the realities of human experience and its many-sided dimensions. Conclusion: "we can teach anthropology to middle-class 9th graders as readily as we can to freshmen and sophomores in college...." [2]

The sociologists, to take another example, are making an important contribution to changing high school social science teaching. The sociology text, of course, can, and has, fallen into the same state of ossification as the history text. Yet there is an important advantage in the sociological approach. It starts with the here and now, with the realities of contemporary history, conflict and experience. The historically trained sociologist has no difficulty drawing upon historical materials to illuminate and deepen the students' understanding of a contemporary problem which they are examining. This sociological approach remedies one defect of traditional history teaching that reduces it sometimes to incurable idiocy. History teachers at all grade levels have crossed Plymouth Rock with their charges so often that the Rock has been worn smooth. Somehow there is never time, K through 12, to reach the present. It's like reading a biography without ever getting to the end. But the sociologist has his roots in the present and this is a colossal advantage -- what, after all, is the average student really interested in, except his own time and his own future? Thus the Kerner Report on Civil Disorders (1968) is a classic of historical sociology; thousands and thousands of copies have been absorbed by the schools. C. Wright Mills' The Power Elite, again, is a difficult book, but it is beginning to come into its own in the schools as a powerful and realistic analysis of our contemporary social order.

In some high school history classes, more especially classes for students going on to college, there have been a number of dramatic innovations. The paperback explosion has made it possible for some

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2. Paul Bohannan, Merwyn S. Garbarino, and Earle W. Carlson, "An Experimental 9th Grade Anthropology Course," American Anthropologist, vol. 71 (1969), 409-19.

teachers to throw out the text entirely and to choose from a variety of documentary collections and monographic writings. We have heard much about the 'inquiry method' which encourages the student to look at conflicting evidence and to weigh conflicting interpretations. [3] In many places new courses have been organized which break out of the ethnocentric bind of 'western culture' and open up the investigation on a much more ambitious scale than before of the history and civilization of African, Latin American, and Asian peoples. [4]

As for teacher training, there have been innovations in this area too. Not a few college historians throughout the country have participated, with the help of Federal funds, in offering summer refresher courses for high school teachers. The John Hay Whitney Foundation has made it possible for some high school historians to take sabbaticals, and has sent them back to school as students for half a year or so. As for the American Historical Association it got a smallish grant from the Ford Foundation in 1956 and set up the Service Center for teachers of history, which has been flourishing ever since. The specific purpose of this Center, we are told, was to bridge "the regrettable gap between the teacher of history in the school and the specialist in historical research." [5] Over the years, the Center has proliferated an impressive number of pamphlets -- 75 to date -- designed to provide teachers with concise information about recent research developments in the various historical fields.

More recently the Association has established its History Education Project under the direction of Professor Gene Asher which until recently was located at the University of Indiana. The purpose of this project, in Asher's words, is

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3. See, for example, the series New Dimensions in American History, a series of paperback edited by Van R. Halsey (Boston, 1964 -); and the "Amherst Series" Problems in American Civilization edited by George Rogers Taylor (Boston, 1949 -).

4. In New York State Public Schools, Asian and African Culture Studies are introduced in Grade 9. The syllabus refers to 'the imperative need for Americans to understand others whose heritage is not Western.' University of the State of New York, Social Studies: Grade 9 (Albany, 1965), 1.

5. "Our aim," writes George Barson Carr, Jr., "is to help the teachers help themselves by keeping up to date in their fields of interest."

> to get historians involved in an active and ongoing dialogue with the classroom teacher and with the curriculum specialist about the need for accurate and relevant history teaching in the classroom today, and the training of teachers to accomplish this end. [6]

Six teams have been organized to set up teacher training programs in various regions of the country, to teach teachers in experimental courses, and to evaluate the usefulness of new teaching aids and materials.

Not to be omitted even in a brief review of innovation in this area is the experimental work being done at schools like John Adams in Portland, John F. Kennedy in Silver Spring, and the Parkway program in Philadelphia. Here the very structure of the school itself is being modified, but this has, inevitably an impact primarily on the teaching of the social studies. Each institution seeks to batter down the walls that isolate the school from the community and to help students to confront and deal directly with the society which they are supposed to be studying. [7]

Interesting though all such innovations are, serious questions must be raised about their adequacy. I am aghast, in particular, at the lethargic nature of the American Historical Association's work and the slowness of its progress. Asher's program is still only in the experimental stage, and its future is jeopardized by a serious lack of funds. The Service Center has produced many meritorious pamphlets, but it has bridged few gaps between the profession and the high school teacher. [8] It does not, in any event, address itself to the very heart of the crisis that is a reality throughout the high school world.

None of these programs -- not the AHA projects, nor parallel projects in anthropology, economics, or sociology, nor the new teaching materials - addresses itself to the fundamental question of

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6. Gene Asher to John A. Scott, August 21, 1969.

7. See Arlene Silberman, "Bold New Directions for U.S. High Schools," Reader's Digest (August, 1969), 87-91.

8. One suspects that its literature has been of much more use to college teachers than to high school historians.

strategy for the teaching of history and the social sciences in the high schools. Precisely what ought the objectives of such teaching to be? What is our strategy for the schools? There is a danger in failing to produce clear ideas with regard to the replacement of the old strategy of indoctrination. In the absence of new ideas here we will continue to fall victim to the methods and the assumptions of the old strategy. Yet it is precisely here, in the formulation of an alternative strategy for the teaching of history and the social sciences that the historical profession, it seems to me, has the greatest contribution to make. And now is the time to make it.

This pragmatic inadequacy of our professional leadership may be illustrated, for example, from Professor Fenton's Teaching the New Social Studies in Secondary Schools. This is a prestigious work. In the eyes of many high school people Fenton is synonymous with the 'new' social studies.

Fenton urges the high school teacher to encourage the student to think and inquire "about human affairs fraught with conflict or tension which might threaten the integrity of a free society." [9] This statement sounds interesting and arouses our curiosity. Is Fenton on the same wavelength as many of the students here? Exactly what does he have in mind -- is he referring to urban blight, racism, war and peace, the defense of civil liberties? Alas, he never tells us: nowhere in the book is this theme elaborated and developed. Fenton fails to give any leadership on the crucial question of precisely and substantively what the students should be invited to think about. All we get from him is a list of categories -- politics, economics, behavioral sciences, geography, history. We get the firm impression that the student who learns to think inductively in these areas -- no matter precisely what he thinks about -- will have received a triumphantly successful introduction to the 'new' social studies.

But this is philosophically incoherent because it substitutes method for substance. Men and women, as thinking animals, cannot be invited to think in a vacuum. There is an alternative method here to the method of indoctrination; but there is no alternative strategy to tell us what is to be achieved, what is to be explored, what is to be investigated, by this method. There is nothing here to dispel the confusion in which many teachers and students are enmeshed.

The question of an alternative strategy for the social studies in the high schools needs now to be debated. Here are a few of the propositions which I personally, would like to see discussed and examined:

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9. The New Social Studies in Secondary Schools (New York, 1966), 112.

I The central assumption of a new strategy should be that we are preparing millions to enter actively into the struggle for social change without which the survival of this country is impossible. This, among other things, involves a struggle for the abolition of racism, poverty, war, and for the defense of the Bill of Rights which is a sine qua non of any intelligent movement for social change.

II To implement and give substance to the curriculum which such a strategy would call for, the historian has his own indispensable contribution to make, and in particular

(a) he can help attack and demolish the racist myths about the history of Black people that have a tenacious grip upon the public mind; and that prevent people from seeing that slavery still survives in American society and from taking the steps necessary finally to abolish it. In demolishing this myth the historian has to show

that slavery was not a benevolent despotism but a malignant barbarism

that the struggle of the abolitionists against slavery was not a campaign put on by stupid bigots but a wise and necessary social movement

that slavery, so far from being abolished in 1865, lives on in essence until our own times

> that the so-called radical Reconstruction was not an 'angry scar' or an 'era of hate' but the effort to fulfill the promise of equality emblazoned on the banner of the American Revolution but never completely fulfilled.

(b) the historian, each in his own special field, can undertake the study of war and peace. He can show how war occurs for good and sufficient reasons arising out of the constitution of society, not merely on account of the aberrations of individuals or from any alleged innate human aggressiveness.

(c) the historian, above all, can explain the Bill of Rights and deal with its critical importance in the reform and revolutionary movements of Western peoples, notably the English, the French and the Americans. He is called upon to show that the Bill of Rights is not an academic subject, but that it has, and has been for centuries, a weapon in the struggle for social change.

III Social science curriculum in its entirety in a given city or community is far too important a matter to be left merely to educationists, social scientists and school professionals. Educational councils may be envisioned composed of both teachers and community people, and where college historians too might play an important part. Such councils could help restore a power to

determine curriculum to the community itself; they could bring together people in a position to guide the community on social science education and who also at the same time would receive guidance from it.

IV In educational terms this country is not, and should be considered, as a uniform mass -- there are dozens of fascinating local and regional differences. History teaching and the teaching of the social sciences in general must therefore expect to be different from place to place, and must strive to develop the significance of regional and local historic themes. We ought to be getting, for example, much more Irish-American history in Boston and Buffalo, much more Chicano history and Spanish studies in L. A. Wherever there are sizable ethnic groups the curriculum needs to reflect that fact so that it can help the people understand their own special ethnic identity and ethnic culture.

In considering such a strategy for history teaching in the schools historians, emphatically, are not asked to renounce a relentless objectivity in pursuit of the truth. They are asked to consider a new function for the discipline: not to support or decorate the status quo, but to illuminate the meaning and the necessity for social change in the interests of survival.

John Anthony Scott